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Barbara Haddock

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April 19, 1978

Dear Mr. Chairman:

I welcome the opportunity to provide you with the Department of State's comments on the report "The Sale of F-15s to Saudi Arabia" prepared for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee by Messrs. Binnendijk and Richardson.

The report is comprehensive and objective. The factors which the Administration weighed in its decision to propose the sale of the F-15 to Saudi Arabia in the Middle East aircraft package are identified and thoughtfully assessed.

We believe the report is particularly useful in underlining those considerations of national interest bearing on the Administration's decision, such as Saudi Arabia's responsible role in the world community, and the negative impact disapproval of the sale could have on Saudi willingness to cooperate with the United States on a wide range of issues. We welcome the report's recognition of the centrality of these issues and its support for the Administration's decision in terms of the larger political implication of the sale.

At the same time the report tends to leave open important questions which have been resolved in the Administration's own assessment and we believe answered in various Administration responses to Congressional questions about the proposed sale. I should like, therefore, to comment on some of these questions.

The Aircraft and Its Use: Possible Threat to Israel

Much discussion has centered around the F-15's air-to-ground or offensive capability. Although manufacturer's specifications state the F-15 can carry up to

The Honorable
John Sparkman,
Chairman,
Committee on Foreign Relations,
United States Senate.

12,000 pounds of external air-to-ground ordnance, the U.S. Air Force version which we propose to sell Saudi Arabia is certified to carry a maximum of one 2,000 pound bomb on each of the aircraft's three pylons. These three pylons can be used to hang external fuel tanks: using one or more of the pylons for bombs limits the aircraft's range and time on station in the air defense role for which Saudi Arabia seeks the F-15. Modifications of the F-15 to permit carrying additional ordnance is a complex undertaking which would require U.S. approval and assistance.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff report also discussed the implications of Saudi Arabia's stationing F-15s at the northwest air base at Tabuk. The Saudis have indicated, however, they do not intend to station F-15s at Tabuk, but rather at the centrally located bases at Dhahran, Taif, and possibly at Khamis Mushait or in the Riyadh area. I am enclosing for your further information a brief discussion paper on Tabuk which explains that Tabuk could not be a main operating base for the F-15 without significant and time-consuming modifications requiring U.S. assistance.

These two technical points relate to the larger question of whether Saudi Arabia would pose a threat to Israel by possessing the F-15. Saudi leaders repeatedly have assured the United States they have no aggressive intentions toward any state in the area. The Saudis recognize that for them to use F-15s outside Saudi borders in a future Arab-Israeli conflict or to base them at Tabuk would risk Israeli retaliatory or even preemptive strikes. If the Saudis were interested in obtaining an aircraft for striking Israeli targets, they would presumably be seeking aircraft with enhanced air-to-ground capabilities such as the Jaguar, Mirage F-1 or F-16. We have concluded that the F-15--primarily an air defense system--will not, in Saudi hands, constitute a threat to Israel.

Saudi Arabia has avoided serious combat in Arab-Israeli conflicts. In 1973 a Saudi brigade moving toward a reserve position in Syria was involved in a brief skirmish with Israeli troops. In 1976 the Saudis withdrew the limited land forces that they had maintained in Syria and Jordan, partially to avoid entanglement in a future conflict.

The Saudis are well aware that using their F-15s for an unauthorized purpose could jeopardize their military supply relationship with the United States, and thus seriously impair their defenses. Most important, Saudi Arabia supports our desire for a peace settlement in the Middle East.

Transfer and Training

We note that the Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff report concludes that the possibilities seem remote that the Saudis could train a large number of foreign pilots on the F-15 without U.S. knowledge and then transfer the prized fighter at the risk of terminating their critical arms relationship with the United States. We support this general conclusion. We would also note that there are additional practical and legal obstacles to transfer of F-15s. No other Arab nation would have the qualified pilots, technicians, ground support equipment, spare parts inventory or munitions to employ F-15s effectively in combat. Unauthorized transfer is also prohibited by U.S. statute; the U.S. would have to give its assent as required by the Arms Export Control Act.

The Threat to Saudi Arabia

Ever since the bombings of southern Saudi towns by Egyptian aircraft supporting the revolution in North Yemen in the 1960s, the Saudis have been particularly sensitive to their vulnerability to air attack. They are properly concerned that their Lightning interceptors, once the advanced aircraft of its generation, but now approaching obsolescence, cannot be kept flying much past 1980. They believe that their F-5s and their minimum radar coverage cannot offer adequate defense against the Soviet MIG-23 currently in the inventory of Iraq--with which Saudi Arabia has a long history of ideological conflict.

Recent events in the Horn of Africa have substantially increased Saudi security concerns. Both Iraq and South Yemen have been actively engaged with the Soviet Union and Cuba in support of Ethiopia. The presence of Soviet, East European and Cuban advisors in South Yemen has forced Saudi planners to address the possibility that South Yemen's communist allies would provide assistance in personnel and equipment to South Yemen in any time of crisis. The People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY/South Yemen) has employed

its forces against Saudi Arabia on three occasions in recent years: a border war in 1969; an air strike in the spring of 1973; and the most recent incident involving ground patrols in the summer of 1976. PDRY forces, battle tested in supporting insurgency in Oman's Dhofar Province, have even more recent experience in assisting Ethiopian forces fighting in the Ogaden region against Somalia.

Given Saudi Arabia's fundamental importance to the United States and the corollary that we have a direct national interest in Saudi Arabia's security, it is the Administration's considered judgment that Saudi Arabia requires an advanced interceptor aircraft to deter these possible threats.

Implications for the Persian Gulf

We have encouraged the small states of the Persian Gulf to work together to provide for regional security, recognizing the reality that Iran and Saudi Arabia, the largest and most powerful of the Gulf states, would play the leading role in this endeavor.

Following the British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf in 1971, the Saudis and Iranians have come to perceive a basic common interest in helping assure the region's security. They share a common recognition of the danger of radical forces to the Persian Gulf. Each regime has a deep concern for the long-term political stability of the other and neither harbors territorial ambitions against the other. The Saudis need to be able to play an effective role in helping to defend the Gulf. We are persuaded that both Iran and Saudi Arabia will regard the latter's acquisition of F-15s within the framework of their common interest in regional security.

Security of the F-15

The judgment of the Department of Defense, based on Saudi performance over the years, is that Saudi procedures governing the security of classified U.S. equipment and documents are excellent. The Department of State shares this judgment. Saudi Arabia has, moreover, no relations with any communist countries and the entry of foreign nationals into the country is carefully monitored. We have concluded, therefore, that compromise of the F-15's technology to the Soviet Union is highly unlikely.

Arms Restraint Policy

The President's policy anticipates a need to continue to make sales of major weapons systems in support of U.S. national security interests and the national security needs of our friends and allies. The current Middle East aircraft package falls within these guidelines. In addition, other aircraft with equally significant combat capabilities have already been introduced into the Middle East. These sales are to be made over a period of years and they will be within the ceiling for fiscal year 1978 and subsequent years established (or to be established) by the President. Total arms sales to non-exempt countries this fiscal year will be reduced by eight percent or $740 million below last year.

Implications of Disapproval of the Sale

Finally, the Administration has concluded after careful analysis that disapproval of this sale would have a serious negative impact on the achievement of critical U.S. foreign policy goals.

The Saudis are determined to acquire an advanced aircraft. We are convinced that they will seek to obtain an alternative advanced aircraft if they cannot obtain the F-15. We believe their preferred alternative would be the French Mirage F-1. This aircraft is available immediately. In addition to possessing a greater air-to-ground capability than the F-15, the Mirage F-1 would not be subject to U.S. controls governing non-transfer.

In addition our refusal to sell the aircraft would undercut Saudi Arabia, whose immense influence in the Arab world stems in part from its close relationship with the United States. Consequently, Saudi influence in fostering moderate attitudes among the Arab states would be reduced.

Finally, I would emphasize that the Saudi approach to our relationship has been one of cooperation, not confrontation. The Saudi Government has urged that in trust and friendship we not abandon our longstanding policy of meeting in responsible fashion legitimate Saudi needs for defensive military equipment. The greatest danger in

denying this sale would be the consequent loss of Saudi Arabia's confidence in our concern for its security. We need to have this confidence particularly strong and unimpaired as we seek Saudi cooperation in the Middle East peace process, in oil pricing and supply, and in efforts to ensure the stability of the dollar.

I hope that the foregoing analysis will be useful to you and other Committee members in answering questions regarding the Saudi Arabian portion of the Administration's current Middle East aircraft package.

Sincerely,

Douglas J. Bennet, Jr.
Assistant Secretary
for Congressional Relations

Enclosure:

Tabuk Discussion Paper

NEA/ARP:JRCountryman
4/10/78:x20303

Clearances: NEA:SSober
T:Mr. Brown
H:Mr. Atwood
PM:Col. Denhart
DOD/ISA:Col. Fifer

TABUK AIR BASE - SAUDI ARABIA

Military installations have existed at Tabuk since before World War II.

The present Saudi air base at Tabuk represents an expansion of the civilian airport which has been used by Saudia, the Saudi Arabian airline since the early 1960s. For some time prior to 1974, it had been used for occasional flights by the Saudi Air Force which maintained a few ground facilities to support such flights. In 1974 the British firm Lang-Wimpey constructed additional facilities at Tabuk and an additional runway. In 1976 a portion of the Saudi Lightning Interceptor Force was stationed at Tabuk.

In addition to infantry elements, Tabuk houses the French armor school, the airborne school, a basic training center and air defense units. The presence of this large number of school and training units, plus dependents confirms the defensive character of the base. The facility at Tabuk is part of the overall Saudi military modernization program which among other things calls for a dispersal of Saudi air and ground units throughout the Kingdom's territory to provide defense of various key locations and strategic routes into Saudi Arabia.

In addition the Saudi Air Force detachment at Tabuk provides necessary and associated services including search and rescue operations, the operation of a weather station and air traffic control. All Saudi military elements at Tabuk provide additionally security and assistance to pilgrims travelling the highway through Tabuk to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina

Saudi Arabia, like all sovereign nations, has a legitimate requirement to protect all of its borders. This fact alone would dictate the establishment of a military facility somewhere in the northwest quadrant of the Kingdom, just as air bases have been built at Khamis Mushait in the south, Dhahran in the east, and at other strategic locations throughout the Kingdom. Beyond that however, there are important historical, geographical, and religious considerations for the existence of the Tabuk base. Tabuk sits astride a traditional invasion route used by both Turks and Egyptians in past centuries. The installation is close to Egypt with whom Saudi Arabia had poor relations for most of the 1960s, particularly during Egypt's military intervention in the Yemen Civil War. Tabuk covers one of the few overland routes from Saudi Arabia to the Near East, an important consideration for a nation whose underdevelopment has in great measure been caused

its geographic isolation. Tabuk's security and assistance role vis-a-vis the pilgrimage traffic assumes considerable importance in light of the strongly religious character of Saudi society, in general, and the seriousness with which Saudi monarchs have taken their responsibilities as the "Defender of the Holy Places."

The Corps of Engineers has not done, nor has it been asked to do, any work on the Tabuk air base. The Corps' projects in Tabuk have included a ground force garrison, including barracks, which was finished in 1972. The Corps is now building at Tabuk additional family housing units for dependents of Saudi ground force personnel. There is also a plan to construct an airborne school facility at Tabuk with Corps assistance.